'Just tell me my four letters!'

Negotiating and confirming self-selection of type preferences

Anne L Russell and Robyn Larner

If only each person could have their innate preferences branded on their forehead at birth, it would make it so much easier to know ourselves and to understand others! Every time we introduce type to people, we could take them to deeper self-understanding, rather than constantly being asked to give them the four letters of their type.

'I wanted to be told what type I was', said **Robyn Larner**, after spending hours reading numerous descriptions of the four dichotomies in Myers-Briggs texts and in her university study guide. But Robyn's INFP lecturer, **Anne Russell**, will never give such direction!!! Instead, she considers that her observations and questions will provide an opportunity for Robyn to determine *for herself* which are her innate preferences.

Has Anne picked up on Robyn's language? Does Anne ask the right questions? Would a facilitator with another personality type have presented Robyn with a different scenario? Can MBTI feedback be presented ethically using email feedback and Internet discussion forums? Has Robyn eventually self-selected ISTJ as her true, innate preferences?

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As part of her postgraduate teacher-librarianship course, **Robyn Larner** (ISTJ) is studying Anne's unit *Communication within an Information Environment*, which is offered off-campus, with a printed S*tudy Guide*, readings and online interactions.

'Just tell me what I am!'

Frequently people are unclear about their Myers-Briggs preferences and require guidance in their selection of best-fit innate preferences. The MBTI facilitator asks questions and listens to the language of the responses, which leads to further questions.

The facilitator brings to the interaction a deep understanding of Myers-Briggs theory, and a recognition that each dichotomous preference is mediated by the dynamic interaction of all of the preferences, plus personal experiences.

Ideally, a person wanting to understand their MBTI preferences will answer the Indicator questions prior to working through a self-selection of their preferences. The *MBTI Manual* strongly recommends that 'respondents self-assess their preferences prior to being provided with their MBTI results' (Myers et al, 1998:116).

Often people who do not understand the hypothesis nature of the MBTI call the instrument a 'test', and see their 'score' or 'clarity' as a true representation of their innate preferences. Inappropriately, people talk about the 'strength' of their preferences.

The Indicator looks for the presence of innate preferences, with no reference to skill, ability or strength. Perhaps it is psychologically easier to agree with an instrument than with the less concrete descriptive explanations of each of the dichotomies and the dynamics of whole type.

Various research studies have looked at agreement between Indicator reports and respondents' self-selections based on description of each dichotomy. The chance of randomly selecting the correct type is 1 in 16, or 6.25%. In 16 studies, the range of agreement with all four preference letters lay between 53% and 85% (Myers et al 1998:116 & 197), with an average of 69.5%.

There is a sharp increase to 97% in the agreement of at least three letters with the Indicator results. Normally it is a result showing a 'slight' indication which is likely to change, because the respondent is not clear or consistent in responding towards one dimension of a dichotomy in the Indicator questions. However, as noted in this article, even an Indicator result of 'clear' may not report an innate preference.

Context: Finding innate preferences

The text in this article comes from interactions between a lecturer (**Anne**) and a post-graduate student (**Robyn**) in an external study online module.

In the Queensland University of Technology unit *Communication within an Information Environment*, a group of 30 to 50 students choose the Myers Briggs option as a framework for exploring interpersonal interactions.

Several weeks prior to the commencement of the module, each student completes Form G and returns it by post to the MBTI-accredited lecturer. Without receiving their indicator results, each student then interacts with the set *Study Guide* activities and readings to understand the four MBTI dichotomies and how their personal experiences illustrate their innate preferences.

While the four basic dichotomies (EI, SN, TF, JP) are introduced, there is an emphasis on distinguishing between the *extraverted* and *introverted* forms of the perceiving (Se, Si, Ne, Ni) and judging (Te, Ti, Fe, Fi) functions. For example, in outlining the *feeling* preference, the *Study Guide* distinguishes between Fe and Fi as follows (Russell, 2003:82):

> **Feeling** (F) means one makes decisions through logic and values in relation to harmonious implications for people.
>
> - People with Feeling which is extraverted (**Fe**) enjoy organising people in building harmonious relationships and outcomes in the external world in accordance with societal expectations.
> - People with Feeling which is introverted (**Fi**) hold strong inner personal values and wish to contribute to the well-being of people.

Working independently, each student writes examples from their life experiences to explain why they have self-selected the four preferences which form their Myers-Briggs type. This writing is shared with other participants when it is posted to a class web-forum discussion. A copy is also emailed to the lecturer, who responds personally via email to each participant.

After reading the email text and identifying compelling or not-so-apparent support for the self-selection, the lecturer looks at the Indicator results and adds this information to provide feedback to the student. The lecturer's response presents the outcome of the MBTI Indicator, and comments on how the student's insightful examples confirm, or may be at variance from, their self-selection.

One such interactive feedback email is presented here. Robyn self-selected **ISFJ** and the Indicator also hypothesised **ISFJ**, but the lecturer, Anne, recognised **ISTJ** language.

Self-selection and personal feedback: 'I will not tell you what you are'

Several weeks prior to exploring the MBTI readings, Robyn had completed the Indicator and returned it to Anne. Anne read the self-selection analysis prior to reviewing Robyn's Indicator results.

The feedback to Robyn is presented, along with her Indicator results and a reminder of some of the assumptions pertaining to the theory behind the Myers Briggs preferences.

COMPARING YOUR SELF-SELECTION WITH THE INDICATOR

About two-thirds of people agree with the way they indicated in the MBTI questionnaire.

The clarity of MBTI Indicator scores is given by Slight, Moderate, Clear and Very Clear.

Your responses were:

    Introversion = Very Clear
    Sensing = Moderate
    Feeling = Clear
    Judging = Moderate

So for you, the MBTI Indicator supports your self-selection.

As I read your examples, I see you have a reasonable understanding of your preferences. However, I see more of an introverted Feeling preference rather than extraverted Feeling preference, and your examples make me wonder if your auxiliary function is extraverted Thinking (Te). I recommend after reading my responses you read some descriptions of the whole types: ISFJ and ISTJ to see which seems to best represent your type.

If your Indicator shows preferences different from those you self-selected there is no problem with your personality type!!!! It merely means you were not clear in your responses to the questions. I will respond in the body of your email to the examples you have given and provide you with the opportunity to decide which are your innate preferences. You are the only person who can know which preferences are innate. Keeping in mind that all preferences are valuable so there is no 'desirable' type!!!!

People may inappropriately respond to the Indicator questions through thinking of what they must do in situations at work or in their home life or how they wish they could be, instead of responding as if being themselves on holidays. Or perhaps they may be responding in ways which reflect their stage of function preference development – where the third and fourth functions are usually developed later. The 3rd function tends to be developed between 20–35 years and the 4th function between 35–55 years. At age 39 you maybe coming out of possible development of your third or tertiary function and this could explain why I am not clear about your T or F preference in the examples you give.

As you have selected Introversion energy, your dominant function will be your perceiving function (introverted Sensing—Si). Therefore in order to have balance your supporting or auxiliary function will be extraverted. In your case this will be your judging function Thinking (Te) or Feeling (Fe) and it is this function which is 'seen and heard' by you

and by others. And your tertiary function is likely to be introverted (Ti or Fi). As you look at descriptions of T and F think back to your high school days if you can — were you more driven by organising tasks and processes (Te) or organising people (Fe). You would have used the other function more easily in your 20s.

The Indicator questions force respondents to make a decision towards one preference in each of the preference pairs. The clarity or consistency of response to all the questions indicates how clear a person is about their innate preferences. Carl Jung's theory says we are born with innate preferences for two functions — one of which is a Perceiving function and the other a Judging function. The Perceiving function would be either Sensing or iNtuition and the Judging function would be either Thinking or Feeling. These functions are balanced with one function being dominant and supported by the other as an auxiliary or second function. And one function is Introverted while the other is Extraverted.

The theory also says that we use all preferences, but the functions which are our third and fourth are never used as easily as our dominant and auxiliary functions. It is like writing with the other hand—we can do it when necessary, but it seems awkward, and demands more concentrated mental processing. With practice we can become quite good at using the other hand, but it never is as automatic or free flowing as when we use our normal hand.

The following interaction presents Robyn's self-selection explanation (in *italics*), with Anne's comments interspersed. Robyn had self-selected and indicated **ISFJ**, yet seemed to be using **ISTJ** language.

Introverted

[**Robyn:**] *'Extroverted is one energised by things and people'*

[**Anne:**] >> Your introversion is aligned with a function and this function is not seen by you or others because it happens in your head.

I have chosen introverted not so much because I am energised by thoughts and that I think before speaking but more that I am not energised by people. I also know that I can be extroverted when in a comfortable surrounding or with close friends.

>> This is a good example of your intro-version. I am interested in your comment you are not 'energised by people' — here

I wonder if your auxiliary preference is T rather than F?

One example from a recent work situation that reinforced this is that being a Distance Education teacher I would prefer to work on tasks and disliked, immensely, when I would be interrupted by a phone call. I still prefer to work without interruption.

>> Again the focus is on tasks — is this also a focus on the details in your inner world? Certainly a good example to show your introversion.

As a child I would read immensely and choose that task over being out with friends. I remember particularly during the school holidays spending the entire day laying on the bed reading never once going outside if I could at all help it.

>> Good example

I recently was called up for Jury Service and the first thing I did was to identify people I knew there, and was comfortable with, to talk with. The jury service lasted 3 weeks and it was only towards the end of that three weeks that I felt more at ease with talking to one of the other jury members – but not all of them – just a few that I had served with.

>> Thank you for this insight — valuable addition to explaining introversion.

Sensing

What guided me in choosing this preference was 'storing information'. I have a great memory for details particularly those details that have affected or influenced my life in some form. I'm terrible with names of people particularly if I haven't had a close relationship with them but if they've said something to me that has hurt me or praised me, I can generally remember the exact details.

There are also certain other triggers that remind me of things – pipe smoke (reminds me of my Grandfather – I still love the smell of pipe tobacco), bush smell – reminds me of my first home).

>> Useful details to demonstrate what it is like to have the introverted form of Sensing (Si).

I remember an incident when I was in primary school. It was a friend's (?) birthday and I'd been invited to stay. The gift I bought her was an ornament of a doll with a dog. On the day following that, at school, the friend ridiculed my gift because she felt she was too old to receive a 'dolly' for her birthday. I still

recall the doll in some detail, the events of the weekend of the birthday and the conversation at school where the result was ostracising by my peers. This is reinforced by the description given of a ISFJ at http://www.personalitypage.com/ISFJ.html:

"If there are negative feelings, they may build up inside the ISFJ until they turn into firm judgments against individuals which are difficult to unseed, once set."

This set has been hard to dislodge at times and has encouraged a mistrust of people to a degree.

>> A good example of your F taking a battering — though it does relate to your introverted Feeling —could be your third or tertiary function coming up awkwardly at that age. Certainly an insecure friend or no friend!!!

Even now I like to know all the details about things I miss and what people say. My husband gets the third degree when he attends something or talks to someone and I'm not there. Unfortunately he doesn't remember detail as I do or is keen to answer the myriad of questions I ask him.

>> Great example of Sensing which is introverted (Si).

I do prefer to learn by doing rather than reading, listening or watching. Whenever we have a new game to learn I find it much easier to play it and work it out as we go than to read the instructions or listen to someone telling me the procedure. Those times the information doesn't sink in and I have to start again.

When I'm listening to people speak I also watch body language and listen to the tone of their voice to determine if I believe that the words they speak are true.

>> Yes Sensates like to see and hear the body language.

Feeling

My initial response was to list feeling as my third preference. But then as I read some of the examples and I wasn't sure whether I was feeling or thinking. Ultimately I came back to this because I have a strong concern for other people and also because I do become concerned for what people think.

>> Yes I have the same dilemma with your responses. Your wording here is interesting — it seems to reflect inner world concern about people. When you say concerned for what people think—do you mean 'what people think of you?' If this is so you are describing the more subjective form of Feeling. If you have Fe it will be your

second or auxiliary function, if Fi it will be your tertiary function. Keeping in mind that your auxiliary function must provide balance by being in the energy opposite to your dominant function. In your case your dominant is introverted.

In work that I do I am always encouraged by the positive feedback I receive. I do tend to become discouraged when I receive no feedback and interpret this as being that I didn't do a good enough job.

>> Is your focus on doing a good job (Te) or on doing a good job to benefit people (Fe)?

I particularly remember in Grade 10 having a maths teacher who was really good and doing anything to please. One incident that sits in my mind was that of having a difficult maths problem to solve and no-one in the class could work it through. I determined to solve it and spent the lunch hour in class working on it. I didn't solve it but it was great to be encouraged by the teacher for my persistence.

>> An Fe function person may have stayed to do it in order to please the teacher. Was your focus on the problem? Though I must admit usually the T people say they know when they have done a good job!!!

Judging

I have chosen this because I love closure. I dislike being left up in the air over issues, where I stand, and what needs to be done. I find it draining when I'm not given direction and have to second-guess what people expect of me. As I was reading through Hirsh and Kummerow 'Introduction to type in organizations: individual interpretive guide' I found in their vocabulary list that I was not a Perception person – except for tentative. I do like to control but more in knowing where I'm going and what is required of me.

>> Your Judging orientation relates to the way you extravert one of your judging functions — either T or F. What do you like to be able to control? People (Fe) or things/ tasks (Te)? Where do your organisational strengths lie — you say below not in delegating.

I have found myself in working situations where it is easier for me to do the job myself than to delegate to others, particularly when I feel that someone else is not likely to do the job well.

>> Concern with the job? Is it more efficient (Te) for you to get the job done, rather than help someone else to build self-esteem through coaching them to do it (Fe)?

'And if they prefer to use Judgement rather than Perception in their attitude to the world around them, they are likely to be better organising the events of their lives than they are to experiencing and adapting to them.'
http://www.capt.org/The_MBTI_Instrument/ Overview.cfm

I know that I have found change very difficult to handle unless I know and understand the reasons behind it. In not handling change it is easier for me to opt out of the situation than to work through it. In a previous work situation where change was instigated by the board it became increasingly difficult to work in that situation as I found the changes too severe and abrupt. Ultimately I chose to leave.

`>>` Look at the words you have used here: I know and understand the reasons behind it is this your T logic needing to be applied? Or are you focused on the value of the change to make things better for people (F)?

As a child I loved the security of knowing that things would stay the same though never really comprehending that they don't. I have 2 older sisters and remember when it came time for them to leave home and go to Brisbane to work and study how devastated I was at the thought. In some ways these were the most important people in my life. I packed my own suitcase and was prepared to leave with them.

`>>` Wow! Your inferior iNtuition (Ne) function came to the fore here with inappropriate possibilities! A good description of the security required by SJ temperament types.

Anne rounded off her feedback to Robyn with these suggestions:

Look at the descriptions of ISFJ and ISTJ in Myers–Briggs books and on the web to see which suits your innate personality preferences – some recommended Websites are http://www.personalitypage.com/info.html and http://www.typelogic.com

You might also look at the temperaments (the SJ temperament is relevant for you):

SJ (= Guardian — need for belonging with a sense of responsibility and duty)

SP (= Artisan — need for acting in the moment and ability to make an impact)

NT (= Rational — need for knowledge, mastery and competence)

NF (= Idealist — need for meaning and significance and unique identify)

You can find more about temperament theory as we discuss it within MBTI at: http://www.tri-network.com/articles and also http://keirsey.com/matrix.html.

Continue to enjoy your explorations of MBTI.

Your discussions are valued.

Regards
Anne

Reflected decision

Following this feedback, Robyn responded:

Thinking back I was more interested in organising tasks than people. I was not confident with people during high school at all.

Two weeks later at the conclusion of the module, after further forum contributions and reading of the contributions of other class members, Robyn confirmed her innate preferences as **ISTJ**:

I reread the email feedback to My Preferences the other day and found it useful, but I suppose I felt I didn't get the information/confirmation I was really after. Just the facts!

I think I wanted to be told what type I was, though obviously being prompted to think about my choices helped to firm in my own mind what my preferences are.

The Indicator as a hypothesis

How likely is the Indicator to be 'wrong'?

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator 'results give the respondent and the interpreter a hypothesis about an individual's type' (Myers, et al 1998:116). The 'strength' or 'clarity' of the Indicator results does not indicate any level of skill or development in a preference, it is merely part of a hypothesis of a whole type.

In this case study, Robyn self-selected **ISFJ** and answered the questions in the Indicator to give an **ISFJ** hypothesis of her type. She was consistent in answering the T-F questions towards Feeling, and came out with a 'clear' score.

Marci Segal scored 'super clear' for iNtuiting in her original three takings of the Indicator, and felt comfortable with her INTP for 15 years (Kerr, 2003:11). Understanding the substantial difference between Sensing which is extraverted (Se) and Sensing which is introverted (Si) enabled Marci to see her form of creatively expressed in the external world of Sensing rather than intuiting, and so 'finally identified the true pattern' of ISTP.

It was the pattern of the *functions in their attitudes* which helped to identify the 'correct' function sequence for Robyn. As she reflects in hindsight:

I just reread this information, and have finally understood why I initially identified myself as ISFJ.

Even after accepting ISTJ — initially due to your questioning, Anne, which wasn't a negative, as you are trained to see things that I hadn't considered — I still questioned why my feelings for the well-being of people was strong. It just clicked with a comment you made in your response to My Preferences about Introverted and Extroverted feeling — I hadn't fully understood the difference.

I went back and checked the description given in the Study Guide *and see now that my introverted feeling '(Fi) wishes to contribute to the well-being of people.' 'Wishes' being the key word. To me that says that the desire is there, but it doesn't often get to the stage of 'enjoy organising people in building harmonious relationships and outcomes in the external world in accordance with societal expectations. Fe'*

I found that the whole type descriptions did help in my assessment, particularly http://www.personalitypage.com*, which gave clear descriptions of the different types—I think they must have written the ISTJ description with me in mind! - and also found that the slight difference with ISFJ raised questions for me.*

There was value in completing this activity on line, with the opportunities for feedback and reflection essential to being able to be comfortable with the preferences made. The chance to reread your response several times allowed me the opportunity to pick up things that I had previously missed.

Admittedly I didn't like identifying myself as a thinking type—it somehow seems clinical rather than compassionate, which is what I would prefer to be seen as—I realise now I just didn't understand the difference between Fi and Fe. Now that I do understand, I can fully accept myself as an ISTJ as I know where Feeling fits in the scheme of things and the way it functions for me.

Giving all the options

Understanding the difference between the introverted and extraverted versions of each function, combined with the dynamic interaction between the functions, provides appropriate options for self-recognition of Myers Briggs type.

The use of email feedback seems to have provided an additional dimension to the confirmation of innate type, as both the MBTI practitioner and the client have the opportunity to revisit their own and each other's comments. The client can 'see' where she has identified *tasks* and *processes*, rather than focused on *people*, in her examples related to personal experiences.

In the case study presented here, there seemed to be a discrepancy between the self-selected four preferences and the language used to give examples to support self-selection. While the T—F dichotomy was the 'problematic' preference, the leads to Robyn's changing from Feeling to Thinking came in her descriptions of her preference selection on the *other* dichotomies.

If, between the Indicator and self-selection, people are likely to correctly hypothesise at least three innate preferences, it is possible to work with this knowledge to identify the energy direction for the functions. For example, if a person is able to verify their orientation as Judgement, s/he is most likely to extravert the function related to Judging and introvert their Perceiving function. Or, if a person knows s/he extraverts iNtuition (Ne), his or her orientation is probably Perception.

In giving feedback, the ability to explain the differences between the eight functions can assist new clients to recognise their own Myers Briggs Type. During self-selection and feedback, the Perceiving or data-gathering functions Se, Si, Ne and Ni and the Judging or decision-making functions Te, Ti, Fe and Fi need to be highlighted.

In this way, the negotiation between the MBTI practitioner and clients will lead to a confident confirmation of innate preferences, so they do not need to say, *Just tell me my four letters!*

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